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minutiae

[image]

It's the little things that make a book worth reading.

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TRIGGER WARNING!

↬ GORE
[death, blood, violence]

↬ TRAUMA
[illness, bullying]

***

INSPIRATION!

↬ Warriors Writing Prompts by moominshrooms

↬ How We Drown by _creamtea_

↬ Flickering Sparks by wishingly

PLAYLIST!

I Know You Know - PSYCH

"embrace the deception; learn how to bend"

Beat It - Michael Jackson

"you're playin' with your life, this ain't no truth or dare"

Under Pressure - Queen

"these are the days it never rains but it pours"

Inside Out - Eve 6

"and find nothing but faith in nothing"

We Don't Have to Dance - Andy Black

"you're never gonna get it i'm a hazard to myself"

Watching the Detectives - Elvis Costello

"you think you're alone until you realise you're in it"

Sherlock Holmes - SPARKS

"just pretend i'm sherlock holmes"

Solve My Mystery - Oasis

"they told me i lost my mind"

Smarter Than U - The Undertones

"can't you see i'm smart?"

We Are Detective - Thompson Twins

"and now i'm nervous and i shouldn't be"

I Don't Mind if You Forget Me - Morrissey

"your mild best wishes, they make me suspicious"

Wolf in Sheep's Clothing - Set it Off

"karma's gonna come collect your debt"

Attention - Bright Guardian Akira

"i'm here to show you that selfishness can destroy a cat"

Everybody Wants to Rule the World - Tears for Fears

"holding hands while the walls come tumbling down"

Don't Tread on Me - We The Kingdom

"gone against the king, gone against the crown"

Your Obedient Servant - Hamilton

"i don't wanna fight but i won't apologise for doing what's right"

The Other Side of Paradise - Glass Animals

"i wish you could see the wicked truth"

SPECIAL THANKS!

↬ Dying_inside_again

↬ noxxfilms

↬ LonerEevee

↬ Stormshade_SP

↬ prophecypaw

ravineclan

KEY

♂ = male
♀ = has mate
= has kits
= expecting kits
↳ = mentor to
↳ = parent(s) to
→ = apprentice to

Leader: Ravenmoon ♀

A black molly with yellow eyes

Advisor: Toadbrine ♂

A blue-grey tom with amber eyes

Heir: Shadowblink ♂

A black mackerel tabby tom with a white face and yellow eyes

Druid: Swallowfall ♀

A dark grey molly with amber eyes

Druid Apprentice: Hollypaw ♀

A grey and black mackerel tabby molly with a white belly, muzzle, and paws; green eyes

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Warriors:

Littlefoot ♀
A black molly with yellow eyes; polydactyl

Stagblaze ♂
A grey-brown and black blotched tabby tom with green eyes
↳ Robinpaw

Briarcliff ♂
A brown and black blotched tabby tom with green eyes
↳ Palepaw

Cardinalfire ♂

A fluffy ginger mackerel tabby tom with a white chin, chest, and paws; amber eyes

Grasshawk ♂

A brown and black spotted tabby tom with green eyes

↳ Breezepaw

Vixenflight ♀

A red molly with a white muzzle and yellow eyes

Brackenstep ♂

A light brown mackerel tabby tom with a white belly, muzzle, and paws; yellow eyes

↳ Cedarpaw

Dawnspots ♀

A brown, cream, grey, and ginger tortoiseshell molly with amber eyes

↳ Sablepaw

Swiftbreeze ♀

A fluffy grey-brown and black mackerel tabby molly with yellow eyes

Orchidwind ♀

A grey and black mackerel tabby molly with yellow eyes

Troutdrift ♂

A grey and black mackerel tabby tom with a white belly, muzzle, and paws; yellow eyes

Fennelpool ♀

A grey and cream tortoiseshell molly with amber eyes

↳ Firepaw

Apprentices:

Cedarpaw ♂
A red tom with a white muzzle and yellow eyes
→ Brackenstep

Robinpaw ♀
A light brown mackerel tabby molly with a white belly, muzzle, and paws; yellow eyes
→ Stagblaze

Firepaw ♂
A fluffy ginger mackerel tabby tom with amber eyes
→ Fennelpool

Breezepaw ♂
A blue-grey tom with amber eyes
→ Grasshawk

Sablepaw ♀
A black molly with yellow eyes
→ Dawnspots

Palepaw ♀
A fluffy white and cream mackerel tabby molly with blue eyes
→ Briarcliff

Queens:

Laurelbird ♀🐾
A ginger and white molly with orange eyes
↳ Expecting

Dahliaskip ♀🐾
A fluffy cream and grey mackerel tabby molly with a white belly, chest, and muzzle; yellow eyes
↳ Patchkit, Larchkit, Petalkit

Kits:

Patchkit ♂
A brown and cream mackerel tabby tom with a white belly, chest, and muzzle

Larchkit ♂
A cream and grey mackerel tabby tom

Petalkit ♀
A cream and white mackerel tabby molly

Veterans:

Junipertuft ♂
A light and dark grey mottled tom with a white muzzle and green eyes

Darkbristle ♂❣
A scruffy black mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

spiderclan

KEY

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⚭ = expecting kits
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↳ = parent(s) to
→ = apprentice to

Leader: Maplemoon ♂

A ginger mackerel tabby tom with a white chest and paws, a fluffy tail, and amber eyes

Advisor: Nighthawk ♂

A dark grey quinn with green eyes

Heir: Honeypool ♀⚭□

A cream, grey, and white tortoiseshell molly with green eyes

Druid: Frondshade ♂

A grey-brown and black spotted tabby tom with amber eyes

Druid Apprentice: Amaranthpaw ♀

A white, black, and ginger calico molly with amber eyes

Warriors :

Gorsebite ♂
A light grey and black spotted tabby tom with yellow eyes

Deerdapple ♀
A light brown molly with a white chest and green eyes

Kestrelspots ♂
A ginger mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

Specklebush ♀
A grey and cream tortoiseshell molly with amber eyes
↳ Thrushpaw

Fuzzywild ♂
A brown and black mackerel tabby tom with green eyes
↳ Pumpkinpaw

Doveperch ♀
A white molly with a grey chin and tail, cream ears, and two differently coloured eyes, one orange and one blue

Poppyblink ♀

A white, black, and ginger calico molly with amber eyes

Coalstripe ♂

A light grey and black mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

Partridgecall ♂

A black tom with white paws, belly, and neck; green eyes

↳ Bleakpaw

Cinderbloom ♀

A blue-grey molly with green eyes

↳ Lacepaw

Cricketleap ♂

A grey-brown and black blotched tabby tom with a white muzzle and green eyes

↳ Eddypaw

Silverleaf ♀

A light grey and black mackerel tabby molly with a white muzzle and green eyes

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Apprentices:

Pumpkinpaw ♀

A ginger mackerel tabby quinn with yellow eyes

→ Fuzzywild

Thrushpaw ♂

A light brown mackerel tabby tom with a white muzzle; blind in one of his green eyes

→ Specklebush

Bleakpaw ♂

A light grey and black mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

→ Partridgecall

Eddypaw ♂
A light grey and black mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes
→ Cricketleap

Lacepaw ♀
A fluffy white molly with two differently coloured eyes, one orange and one blue
→ Cinderbloom

Queens:

Brindlefern ♀
A fluffy black and white molly with green eyes
↳ Mintkit, Greykit, Lambkit

Cherrydrift ♀
A black, cream, and ginger tortoiseshell molly with green eyes

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Kits:

Mintkit ♀
A black and white molly

Greykit ♂
A light grey and black spotted tabby tom

Lambkit ♂
A black and white tom

Veterans:

Crystalfang ♂❣□
A ginger mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

Willowmink ♀❥❣□
A fluffy white and grey molly with yellow eyes

Thriftdusk ♂❥❣□
A fluffy grey-brown and black mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

thicketclan

KEY

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Leader: Thicketmoon ♂

A powerful ginger mackerel tabby tom with green eyes

Advisor: Yarrowdusk ♂

A dark grey tom with a white muzzle and paws; green eyes

Heir: Burnetblaze ♂

A ginger mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

Druid: Chasewhisker ♂

A white and black tom with yellow eyes

Druid Apprentice: Morningpaw ♀

A brown, cream, and ginger tortoiseshell molly with blue eyes

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Warriors:

Meadowtear ♀
A fluffy cream and white mackerel tabby molly with yellow eyes
↳ Featherpaw

Butterflymint ♀
A cream mackerel tabby molly with yellow eyes
↳ Fawnpaw

Ashengrove ♀
A grey mackerel tabby molly with white paws and green eyes
↳ Slatepaw

Timberflake ♂
A light brown and black mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

Nettlespring ♀
A silver and black mackerel tabby molly with green eyes

Pepperspots ♀
A light brown, white, and black tortoiseshell molly with blue eyes

Hickoryfang ♂

A dark brown mackerel tabby tom with yellow eyes

Streamstone ♂
A blue-grey mackerel tabby and white tom with green eyes

Skunktwist ♂
A white and black tom with yellow eyes

Panchobrook ♂
A grey-brown mackerel tabby tom with a white muzzle and green eyes
↳ Birchpaw

Dustyhare ♀
A light brown and black mackerel tabby molly with a white muzzle and paws; green eyes
↳ Tawnypaw

Primrosepelt ♀
A light grey molly with yellow eyes

Apprentices:

Featherpaw ♀
A silver and black mackerel tabby molly with green eyes
→ Meadowtear

Slatepaw ♂
A silver and black mackerel tabby tom with green eyes
→ Ashengrove

Tawnypaw ♂
A cream and white ticked tabby tom with blue eyes
→ Dustyhare

Fawnpaw ♀
A cream molly with brown points and blue eyes

→ Butterflymint

Birchpaw ♂
A cream mackerel tabby tom with a white chest, muzzle, and paws; blue eyes
→ Panchobrook

Queens:

Blossomdawn ♀
A black and ginger tortoiseshell molly with yellow eyes
↳ Campionkit, Almondkit

Kits:

Campionkit ♂
A ginger tom with a white chest

Almondkit ♀
A black and ginger tortoiseshell molly

Veterans:

Callamouse ♂

A fluffy cream mackerel tabby tom with a white chest, muzzle, and paws; yellow eyes

Thimbleweed ♀❣
A silver and black mackerel tabby molly with green eyes

I

I burn, burn like a wicker cabinet.

Cedarpaw stalked carefully up the slope, all senses strained to their limit. He knew his deep red fur would make straying from what little cover the scattered grasses and shrubbery provided risky, but no cat ever made a good catch by waiting for prey to wander into their paws. Hesitating was just a waste of time.

Can you see me, Brackenstep? Low and slow, just like you taught me.

He could see the grass rustling again now, confirming that the flickering of movement he'd spotted earlier was indeed prey. As soon as the movement stopped, he pounced, knowing that it was now or never.

A moment later he slid back out with a dishevelled gerbil. It was a plump one too, and he couldn't resist swishing his tail in satisfaction. Surely no cat could find fault in a juicy piece of prey like that?

"Excellent find, Cedarpaw," Brackenstep purred. "You're turning into a fine hunter."

Cedarpaw brushed against his father affectionately, beaming around his catch. It hadn't always been easy for Brackenstep to teach him the proper way to hunt, but what Cedarpaw lacked in patience, he made up for in speed—or at least tried to.

"Why don't we head back to camp and you can show it off on the fresh-kill pile?" Brackenstep suggested lightly. "I think we've caught plenty today."

Cedarpaw nodded eagerly and followed him back down the slope. Brackenstep's pace was relaxed, and he stopped to collect the two

hares they had caught earlier. RavineClan camp slowly but surely came into view as they approached. The stone-lined gorge looked almost as if some huge beast had dragged a claw through the earth to form it.

"Looks like you had good hunting," Troutdrift greeted them, his voice warm. "I was hoping to head out and catch something for Laurelbird, but I'm stuck here on watch at the moment."

"I'll swap with you after I report to Ravenmoon," Brackenstep offered.

"Oh, would you?" Troutdrift pleaded. "That's so kind! I owe you one."

"Don't mention it," Brackenstep purred. He then turned to Cedarpaw, flicking his tail. "Go on then. Drop your gerbil on the pile and you're dismissed for the day."

"Thanks, Brackenstep!" Cedarpaw chirped. *My dad has such a knack for brightening things up.*

Padding over to the fresh-kill pile, he placed the gerbil gently near the top so it wouldn't be hidden. Few things were more disappointing than heading there after a long day only to realise the best bits of prey all got lost at the bottom.

Have Dahliaskip's kits tried gerbil yet? It's not quite as good as vole, but maybe she'd like it...

"Catch that yourself?"

Much as he hated to admit it, 'a short fuse' did little to truly describe Cedarpaw's temper. In fact, he really felt *all* his emotions extra strongly, which meant most cats considered him volatile. And no cat knew how to set him off better than Breezepaw—kit to Ravenmoon and Toadbrine and by all Cedarpaw's accounts a certified pain in the tail.

"Actually, I did," Cedarpaw snapped, turning to face him. Breezepaw's short, blue-grey coat was well-groomed as usual. "It's a fine enough contribution to the Clan. But I guess you wouldn't know

much about that, would you?"

Breezepaw's ears flattened as he scowled, causing a jolt of satisfaction to run through Cedarpaw. It was liberating, in some odd way, knowing that he could drag Breezepaw right down with him whenever they fought.

"I hunt just as much as you and every other apprentice and you know it," Breezepaw hissed. "Really, I'm impressed you caught anything. You sure you still don't want any of my advice about fishing?"

"I *am* a good hunter, and it *was* a great catch, Brackenstep said so himself!" Cedarpaw shot back. "Keep your smelly fish. I bet Dahliaskip would prefer dry prey anyway."

"Actually, I think I might just try some gerbil myself, if it's really such a good catch," Breezepaw decided nonchalantly.

Somewhere deep down, Cedarpaw knew he should just let it go. Scowl and turn tail and lick his wounds in the apprentice's den for a while to calm down. Wasn't a good warrior supposed to manage their rage even in a heated battle? Instead, though, Cedarpaw welcomed the hot, hot blood that swirled beneath his pelt.

And as suddenly as it came, it was all gone. His limbs suddenly seemed heavier, the rush of adrenaline had died down, and he couldn't quite be sure how Ravenmoon had ended up between him and Breezepaw.

"What in the name of Stars has gotten into both of you *this* time?" Ravenmoon demanded, glancing sternly between them. "Cedarpaw, we've discussed keeping your temper in check before. Breezepaw, as my kit, I'd expect you to conduct yourself more respectfully with your peers."

"He started it," Breezepaw sneered, glaring at Cedarpaw. "Besides, it's not my fault the freak doesn't know how to make friends."

This time, Cedarpaw didn't have a retort handy. Because, this time, Breezepaw was actually right. He really *had* started it, hadn't he?

And for what? Just because he'd anticipated Breezepaw doing the same?

"...Well, it looks to me like Cedarpaw is plenty sorry about everything," Ravenmoon observed kindly. "Aren't you, Cedarpaw?"

"I am," Cedarpaw agreed hastily, trying not to choke on his words. "I'm really sorry, Breezepaw... You can have the gerbil."

"No, I'm sorry too," Breezepaw sighed. "It was a stupid thing to say, on both our ends. Go ahead and let Dahliaskip and the kits have it."

"That's a bit more like it," Ravenmoon purred. "You know, if you two can keep getting along so well tomorrow, I might consider letting you come to the Newmoon Gathering tomorrow."

"Really?" Both apprentices shared the same expression of shock and eager hopefulness.

I've been before, but that doesn't make it any less exciting to go!

Is the river going to be deeper this time?

What kinds of cats will be there?

...Will the other apprentices like me?

"We'll just have to see if you two can behave yourselves until then," Ravenmoon replied teasingly. "Cedarpaw, after you give Dahliaskip that prey, I'd like you to help Swallowfall sort herbs for a while."

"Yes, Ravenmoon," Cedarpaw replied, dipping his head. *I guess getting out of this without some kind of punishment was too much to hope for...*

***

Cedarpaw trundled into the apprentice's den feeling thoroughly beat. Swallowfall had been very kind, and even offered him some chamomile to help him relax once he'd finished his work. His nest was next to his sister's, and he could see that Sablepaw and Palepaw were already asleep in theirs.

Firepaw must still be out, or stuffing himself at the fresh-kill pile, lucky furball.

"You look and smell like a dead cat walking," Robinpaw teased, gently brushing against his fur in greeting. "...I heard you and Breezepaw went at it again. Do you want me to find another beetle to put in his nest?"

"No, it's all been sorted," Cedarpaw laughed. "What about you? Catch anything while you were out with Stagblaze?"

"I *wish*," Robinpaw groaned, flopping into her nest with a dramatic flourish. "No, *my* mentor just had me swimming in the river all day. Not even fishing!"

"I'm sure you'll get to hunt tomorrow then," Cedarpaw assured her, settling down into his own nest.

"Probably," Robinpaw agreed. "I suppose I just feel like complaining since I'm tired out from it."

"I know I'm about ready to get some sleep," Cedarpaw purred. "I think there must be more herbs in Swallowfall's den than hairs on my pelt!"

"Could I keep you up for just a moment longer?"

"You're keeping us *all* up, cloud-brains," Sablepaw groaned, flicking her tail irritably.

"Sablepaw, don't be grumpy, your brother only just came in," Palepaw yawned.

"What do you want, Breezepaw?" Robinpaw growled. "I think Cedarpaw has had quite enough of you for one day."

"I told you it's all fine," Cedarpaw cut in sheepishly. "Although, what *did* you want, Breezepaw?"

"I was just thinking it might be a good idea for us to agree to a truce," Breezepaw explained. "We're already going to be trying to keep out of each other's fur. Don't you think it would be a good idea

to make the whole thing official, at least until then?"

"...I think I can agree to that," Cedarpaw decided. "Claws *and* tongues sheathed until after the Newmoon Gathering."

"Right, that's settled then," Breezepaw agreed. After sniffing the air, he added, "You know, I think I remember Hollypaw telling me that lavender or thyme can make a cat feel calmer without making them sleepy like chamomile does."

"I've never tried lavender," Cedarpaw admitted. "Thyme is just for starshock, I think. Thanks for the tip."

Breezepaw had apparently run out of things to say, because he only offered a small nod before finally curling up in his nest. Sablepaw and Palepaw had watched their interaction with apparent curiosity, but soon flopped back over. Robinpaw had dozed off about halfway through.

Maybe it's not always perfect, but this is home. I really wouldn't give it up for anything.

Yawning, Cedarpaw curled up himself. It had been a fairly usual, if tiring, day. He was more than happy to cling to this sudden feeling of warmth as the sound of the other apprentices' breathing gently lulled him to sleep.

II

Find you fascinating by five past ten.

A sharp prodding drew Cedarpaw from his slumber. Still groggy, he released a small groan before rolling over and slowly opening one eye. Palepaw was standing over him, one paw raised and an apologetic smile on her face.

"Hello, Cedarpaw," she greeted him warmly. "Brackenstep asked me to wake you, since Robinpaw is still out on the dawn patrol. I hope you slept well."

"Fine, thanks," Cedarpaw yawned. He rose to his paws, stretching and shaking out his pelt. "What's Brackenstep need anyway?"

"He, Briarcliff, Fennelpool, and Grasshawk are all discussing our training for the day," Palepaw explained. "We both thought you wouldn't want to sleep through that. Breezepaw and Firepaw are already out there with them."

Mother Moon, please let me get through this without clawing Breezepaw's ears off...

"So, are you coming to join us?" Palepaw asked, distracting Cedarpaw from his thought. Her fluffy white head was tilted, curiosity and kindness rimming her blue eyes.

"Sorry, I spaced out there for a second," Cedarpaw replied sheepishly. "I'm coming."

"You must still be pretty sleepy," Palepaw purred.

"Maybe," Cedarpaw agreed, allowing a playful edge to creep into his tone. "I'm still not as bad as you are whenever you and Robinpaw train together though!"

He then quickly brushed past Palepaw as she registered what he said. Sure enough, Fennelpool, Brackenstep, Grasshawk, and Briarcliff were all clustered together in the centre of camp. Firepaw and Breezepaw were nearby, clearly throwing in their own input whenever they saw fit. The whole group paused and turned to watch as Palepaw bowled Cedarpaw over playfully.

"I see you managed to wake Cedarpaw after all," Brackenstep purred. "Good work."

"Don't tell me you've already been starting fights?" Breezepaw teased, though there was no malice in his tone, only amusement.

"Oh, no, Cedarpaw and I were just playing," Palepaw assured them quickly, letting Cedarpaw up. He shook the dust from his pelt and gave Palepaw's ear a friendly tail-flick.

"I'm glad you've warmed your muscles up, then," Briarcliff decided. "We'll be splitting up into pairs for battle training today."

"Shall we train together again, Brackenstep?" Grasshawk asked. "Breezepaw has learned a few new moves we could practice."

Brackenstep appeared cheerful, although Cedarpaw didn't catch what he said. As if on instinct, he curled his claws into the ground. He and Breezepaw then shared a quick, anxious glance.

Well? What now? We both know that *won't end well!*

"Actually, I was thinking it might be fun to train with Palepaw today," Breezepaw suggested lightly, sending Cedarpaw a tiny nod. "I'm feeling like a challenge, and Cedarpaw and I know each other's moves too well."

"Sounds good to me," Briarcliff agreed. "Palepaw could use some toughening up."

"I'm plenty tough!" Palepaw shot back, fluffing up her fur to make herself look more intimidating. "It's not my fault that Firepaw is bigger than the rest of us!"

"I think you all are just short," Firepaw teased lightly. "Seriously,

have you and Cedarpaw gotten *any* bigger since you've been apprenticed?"

"Oh, you'll pay for that one," Cedarpaw informed him, eyes flashing eagerly. "Besides, we all know that extra size you've got is all just fluff!"

"Hey, I'll have you know this is pure muscle!" Firepaw retorted.

"Save it for the battlefield, you two," Brackenstep chided, not bothering to hide the amusement in his tone.

"Oh, let the toms have their fun," Fennelpool purred indulgently. "Though I suppose we should get going if we want to start training before sunhigh. Shall we head to the Ice Thistle Hills?"

"My thoughts exactly," Brackenstep agreed.

"We'll take the shore of the river, then," Grasshawk decided. "I want to see what Breezepaw and Palepaw can do in the water."

The group made their way up the rocky slope that let them in and out of camp. Cedarpaw darted ahead with Firepaw, looking forward to the day's activities.

***

The Ice Thistle Hills were a cluster of brush and stones surrounded by grasses that were always some shade of wheaty gold regardless of the season. Firepaw was definitely taller than him, so Cedarpaw hoped he could somehow use ducking down into the foliage to his advantage. Battles were only fun if you had a level playing field, which sometimes meant getting creative.

"Alright, why don't you two show us what you've got and we'll decide what to work on from there?" Fennelpool suggested. She shot Brackenstep an inquisitive look, and he nodded approvingly.

"That sounds fine," he meowed. "Now remember you two; sheathed claws. And no tricks!"

Cedarpaw kept light on his toes as he and Firepaw circled the

clearing, eyes locked. Firepaw finally pounced, prompting Cedarpaw to roll out of the way. He kept himself low to the ground as he lifted himself back to his paws.

"Hey! Where'd you go?" Firepaw demanded, pausing to taste the air.

I've got you now!

That was exactly the opening Cedarpaw had been hoping for. Darting like a snake, he charged into Firepaw's legs to topple him. He clambered on top of a bewildered Firepaw with a triumphant purr.

Firepaw, of course, immediately retaliated by easily shaking Cedarpaw off. He landed with an *oomf,* but was too happy that his idea had worked to care.

"I thought Brackenstep said no tricks," Firepaw pointed out, although he didn't seem annoyed at all, mostly teasing.

"That wasn't a trick," Cedarpaw purred. "I let you throw me off afterwards. That was called *strategy*."

"Oh, so hiding like a rabbit is a strategy now?" Firepaw laughed.

"Okay, maybe it was a *little* tricky," Cedarpaw admitted. "It worked though, didn't it?"

"It certainly did," Brackenstep chuckled. "RiftClan cats usually prefer to fight head-on, but I suppose it might be good practice in case we ever end up in a war with SpiderClan."

"That's true," Fennelpool agreed. "SpiderClan cats are smaller than us. It's interesting, getting a small taste of how they might think."

"I'm not *that* small," Cedarpaw protested hotly. "I just didn't think we'd have a fair match going head-on."

"I thought your move was great," Firepaw assured him, running his tail down Cedarpaw's spine. "Think you could show me how to do something like that?"

It never fails. Firepaw really is the best friend a cat could ask for.

Cedarpaw glanced hopefully up at their mentors. Fennelpool, as with anything her apprentice suggested, looked all for it. Brackenstep's friendly purr suggested he felt the same.

"Go ahead then, Cedarpaw," Fennelpool prompted. "Show us how you did that."

***

By the time they returned to camp it was well past sunhigh. Firepaw had picked up Cedarpaw's new move very well, and even if he hadn't Cedarpaw had simply enjoyed training with him. Although it went unnoticed initially, the growling in his belly was reminding him that he hadn't eaten yet.

"Go get something from the fresh-kill pile," Brackenstep offered kindly. "You and Firepaw have both earned it."

Dipping his head in fervent thanks, Cedarpaw quickly made his way over to the fresh-kill pile. It was relatively well-stocked, thanks to it being green-leaf, and he immediately snatched up the vole he saw sticking out. Firepaw selected a pair of mice for himself before the two settled down outside of the apprentice's den.

"You're pretty cheery today," Firepaw remarked between mouthfuls. "It's nice."

"I guess it's just been a good day," Cedarpaw purred. Vole really was the sweetest-tasting prey. "Training was fun, the weather is fine, and best of all I think I'm going to get to go to the Newmoon Gathering this evening!"

"What makes you think that?" Firepaw purred back.

"Ravenmoon said Breezepaw and I could go if we behaved ourselves today," Cedarpaw explained.

"So that's why you two have been keeping out of each other's fur," Firepaw guessed. "I suppose Sablepaw and Robinpaw will be going with you?"

"Well, Ravenmoon hasn't announced anything yet," Cedarpaw pointed out. "I hope so. Were you wanting to go?"

"I can live without the other Clans' gossip," Firepaw assured him. "I'd rather get a good night's sleep tonight and hear about it all in the morning. Less hassle."

Cedarpaw nodded in understanding, relishing another mouthful of his vole. Glancing around at the activity in the camp, he noticed Ravenmoon leaping onto the Highperch.

"Let all cats old enough to scale the ravine gather beneath the Highperch to hear my words," she yowled, prompting all the cats in camp to slowly gather around her.

"Good luck," Firepaw whispered, brushing against Cedarpaw's fur affectionately. He nodded gratefully, catching sight of Breezepaw's expectant gaze out of the corner of his eye.

We stuck to our truce. Surely that means we'll get to go, right?

"As you all know, tonight is the night of another Newmoon Gathering," Ravenmoon began. "The cats accompanying me will be Toadbrine, Shadowblink, Swallowfall, Fennelpool, Troutdrift, Dawnspots, Vixenflight, Cardinalfire, Junipertuft, Darkbristle, Robinpaw, Cedarpaw, Sablepaw, and Breezepaw."

At the sound of his name, Cedarpaw's heart lifted. Every cat who had been called seemed pleased, apart from Troutdrift who hastily slipped into the nursery to check on Laurelbird. Even Breezepaw let his tail swish in excitement.

"That will be all," Ravenmoon informed them. "Meeting dismissed."

The crowd of cats slowly but surely dispersed, returning to their previous engagements. Cedarpaw and Firepaw were finishing off their prey when Breezepaw padded over to them.

"Hello, Breezepaw," Firepaw purred. "Congratulations on you and Cedarpaw getting to go to the Gathering."

"Thanks," Breezepaw purred back.

"I trust I won't be getting any reports from your mentors making me change my mind?" Ravenmoon chimed in. She seemed to have a habit of appearing out of nowhere.

"Nope, not a thing," Breezepaw assured her. "Right, Cedarpaw?"

"Right," Cedarpaw agreed.

"Good," Ravenmoon purred. "Then you two rest up for this evening!"

Now that, Cedarpaw knew, was an order he could get behind.

III

Faking smiles and confidence.

Whitegleam glittered in the obsidian sky, an ethereal diamond surrounded by the smaller, sparkling opals known as stars. Cedarpaw had to admit that on nights like tonight, he could see why cats held Mother Moon in such high esteem. It was enchanting, a pale glowing orb that softened the lighting and almost seemed to be hinting at the smallest traces of magic, and certainly seemed worthy of the title of a deity.

Are you really out there, AzureClan? Can you see me?

"Come on Cedarpaw, keep up!" Robinpaw chirped, distracting Cedarpaw from his brief reverie. He bounded forward with a relaxed purr, brushing against her shoulder.

"Keep your fur on," he teased, glancing at the stepping stones that led to the peninsula where the three Clans gathered on these nights. "ThicketClan is taking their time. I wouldn't have been left behind."

"My mom is just being polite, letting them pass us," Breezepaw pointed out stiffly. Although his tone suggested scolding impatient kits, Cedarpaw could see the same eagerness in his eyes and stance.

"Well, lucky for you, I'm the last cat you'll have to wait on," a cheerful voice informed them. "The Newmoon Gathering is such a thrill, isn't it? Sure gets the apprentices' blood raring."

The three apprentices spun around, and the speaker was revealed to be a cream tabby tom with extremely soft-looking fur. One of his legs didn't seem to line up with the others quite right. His expression was one of kind amusement as he slipped past them and carefully made his way across. One of the other ThicketClan warriors, Cedarpaw thought her name might have been Ashengrove,

helped him on the last jump.

"RavineClan, follow me," Ravenmoon ordered simply. She shared a polite nod with Thicketmoon, who was standing across the shore with his Clan.

Cedarpaw decided to stick close to his mother while crossing. He could swim well enough, he hoped, but the thought of falling headfirst into the night-dark water wasn't exactly appealing. Although Vixenflight gently nudged him as needed, he didn't relax until he was firmly on the other side of the stepping stones.

"Well done, kit," Vixenflight whispered, lapping him between the ears. "You were much more centred this time. Your practice is paying off."

"Thanks," Cedarpaw purred softly. *I would be even better if I didn't have these dumb nerves slowing me down.*

Robinpaw joined them, and soon the whole Clan was clustered on the peninsula. ThicketClan had already left, so Ravenmoon flicked her tail, a silent signal to follow. Cedarpaw bounded ahead of his mother slightly, easily keeping pace with Robinpaw now that they were on solid ground again.

He then skidded to a halt inside the clearing entrance. The familiar scents of SpiderClan and ThicketClan threatened to overwhelm him, so he needed a moment to collect himself. Ravenmoon padded past and made her way to the large rock where the leaders would share this moon's news. The rest of the cats fanned out to mingle.

"Going to stand there until your paws take root?" Vixenflight asked, flicking his ear. "Go on, I'm sure the other cats don't bite. It is a truce, after all!"

"I'm just watching to see what they're all like first," Cedarpaw assured her. He flicked his tail towards a silver and black molly being introduced to Breezepaw by a brown tabby tom. "See, that tabby apprentice must be shy, so she wouldn't be a pain to talk to. And I already know Thrushpaw is nice."

"Just make sure you try to have a little bit of fun, alright?" Vixenflight replied warmly. "It's the Newmoon Gathering! You have to make the most of these nights."

She gave him another lap between the ears before padding off to speak with Silverleaf, a light grey SpiderClan warrior. Cedarpaw mulled over her words, still slightly uncertain, but then he caught the eye of the kindly cream tom from earlier. He began to pad across the clearing in that direction.

He didn't seem angry, but perhaps he still deserves an apology.

The cream tom was currently engaged in a conversation with Darkbristle and a fluffy white molly who smelled like she must be from SpiderClan. All SpiderClan cats smelled of sap and bird feathers. Cedarpaw didn't want to interrupt, so he settled down nearby to let them finish.

"How is that druid of yours doing these days, Callamouse?" the white molly asked.

"Chasewhisker? Oh, he's just fine," Callamouse assured her. "I know how he seems, but he's done no harm to any cat."

"Thankfully," Darkbristle grumbled. "That tom always has his head in the clouds. Although I suppose apprentices start off that way, too."

"He has Morningpaw now to keep him in line," Callamouse pointed out. He then shot Cedarpaw a knowing wink that went unnoticed by the other two veterans, adding, "An apprentice's energy can be quite useful, I find. Who else is going to keep us sharp?"

"True," the white molly purred. "Thrushpaw and Lacepaw are such dears, coming along with me on hunts."

"Trying to fish the veterans for secrets, kit?" a gruff voice asked.

Startled, Cedarpaw whipped around to meet the sharp yellow gaze of a stern-looking black and white tom. He smelled strongly of ThicketClan. It was an odd scent, something Cedarpaw couldn't place, mixed with damp, leafy foliage.

"Well?" the tom demanded. "What do you think you're doing, eavesdropping like this?"

"I wasn't eavesdropping," Cedarpaw defended himself hotly. "And I'm not a kit, either. I wanted to talk to Callamouse, but it seemed rude to interrupt when he was already in a conversation. So I was *waiting* like a *good apprentice*."

The black and white tom opened his mouth again, but was cut off by Darkbristle. The RidgeClan veteran had flopped over and pricked his ears up in interest.

"Is that Cedarpaw?" he asked, nodding in a friendly manner. "Leave him be, Skunktwist. He's not bothering us."

"We hardly knew he was here," the white molly added. "You don't have to be shy, dear, why don't you come sit with us?"

Skunktwist scowled, so Cedarpaw decided to take her up on that offer. He slid in between Darkbristle and Callamouse. Thankfully, Skunktwist merely stormed away silently.

"Thanks for that, all of you," Cedarpaw mewed earnestly. *I wonder what's got Skunktwist so grumpy on a full moon.*

"Don't mention it," the white molly purred. She had a softly sympathetic gaze trained on Skunktwist. "And don't mind him either. He probably just had his tail in a twist from the way we were talking about his brother."

"I think you're just too keen to forgive cats, Willowmink," Darkbristle replied tartly. "You and Callamouse."

"And I think you're just a grumpy old badger," Callamouse teased lightly. "Now then, Cedarpaw, what was it you wanted to tell me?"

"Oh, right," Cedarpaw replied. "Well, I just thought maybe I should apologise for Breezepaw, Robinpaw, and me being so impatient earlier."

"Is that all?" Callamouse purred. "Don't worry yourself over that none. Apprentices *should* get excited, that's part of learning too."

"Well..." Cedarpaw began, but he trailed off as Callamouse gave him a friendly nudge.

"Go on and spend time with your friends," Callamouse insisted, his tone gentle but firm. "This is a night for you to have fun."

"Yes, you can't want to waste the Newmoon Gathering away chattering with our old bones," Willowmink laughed.

Cedarpaw shrugged and gave the veterans a friendly wave of his tail before bounding over to Robinpaw. She was on the quieter edge of the clearing and chatting with the silver apprentice from earlier, along with a cream apprentice Cedarpaw also didn't recognise.

"Here he is now!" Robinpaw purred, greeting Cedarpaw with a friendly tail-flick. "I was telling Featherpaw and Birchpaw about the time you fell off the Highperch."

"Only because you and Firepaw dared me to climb up there!" Cedarpaw shot back, promptly bowling her over.

"You two really are littermates," Birchpaw chuckled. "Sometimes I think Tawnypaw and Fawnpaw could drive me up a tree—literally."

"Are you new apprentices, or have we just never met at a Newmoon Gathering before?" Cedarpaw asked, letting Robinpaw push him off.

"We're new," Birchpaw replied. "Well, my littermates and I have been apprentices for a little over a moon, but this is our first time getting to come to the Newmoon Gathering."

"I've been before with my brother, but I don't think we've spoken even though I've seen you," Featherpaw added. "Your red fur is easy to remember."

"Is Slatepaw your brother?" Cedarpaw guessed. "He was nice."

"Yes, you must have a good memory!" Featherpaw purred.

"Let all cats gather around to hear us speak!" Thicketmoon called, his voice reverberating around the clearing. "The Newmoon Gathering may now officially begin!"

Cedarpaw decided to take a seat beside Robinpaw, preferring the company of a cat he knew. Sablepaw and Breezepaw seemed to share the sentiment, as he could just make out the pair of them together. Though Clan advisors usually sat beneath their leaders while news was being shared, only Toadbrine and Yarrowdusk seemed to be present.

I wonder where Nighthawk is? Surely they wouldn't want to miss this?

"RavineClan will share first, with your permission?" Ravenmoon announced, earning agreeable nods from Maplemoon and Thicketmoon. "Prey is running well in the scrublands and river. Laurelbird has recently moved into the nursery, as she and Troutdrift are expecting kits."

That piece of news prompted many purrs and murmurs of congratulations, which Troutdrift received by sheepishly bowing his head. Maplemoon stepped forward on the rock, swishing his fluffy tail almost anxiously.

"SpiderClan has less pleasant news to report," he began. "Two nights ago, Nighthawk fell ill after eating a strange piece of fresh-kill. They have yet to recover. We do not know whether this is a serious issue or not, but I thought I would pass on a word of caution just in case."

Amaranthpaw sure looks like she *thinks it's a serious issue*, Cedarpaw thought. Surely it was a bit odd for the druid apprentice to be attending the Newmoon Gathering without her mentor, and casting such a look of worry towards her leader to boot?

"Thank you, Maplemoon," Ravenmoon replied. "We'll keep an eye on what our warriors and apprentices bring in."

"Thank you," Maplemoon repeated, seeming relieved. "Nighthawk had eaten a blackbird, although Frondshade let me know afterwards that the feathers were... odd. If you find fresh-kill that appears matted, I'd suggest dumping it."

"Well, on that note," Thicketmoon cut in, swishing his tail once, "ThicketClan has little to report. Blossomdawn and I are pleased to announce that we have been blessed with two kits, Almondkit and

Campionkit. Birchpaw, Tawnypaw, and Fawnpaw are also here as new apprentices."

The gathering of cats once again broke into, albeit slightly more reluctant, cheering. Maplemoon's warning seemed to have cast a growing shadow of doubt over the clearing.

"This Newmoon Gathering has come to an end," Ravenmoon announced. "Take some time to say your goodbyes, but we will be returning to our camps soon."

"That sure was a bit odd, wasn't it?" Robinpaw remarked. "Matted blackbirds making cats sick? Either Maplemoon has gone batty or something else is going on..."

"I never liked birds much anyway," Cedarpaw replied, hoping to lighten the mood. "For all we know, Nighthawk just swallowed a feather or something."

"Maybe," Robinpaw conceded, although she still didn't seem convinced.

"Listen, why don't we go ask Amaranthpaw about it before we leave?" Cedarpaw suggested. "She'll know what's going on."

"That's a wonderful idea," Robinpaw purred.

The two made their way towards the calico in question. She was leaning against Thrushpaw, and Cedarpaw was surprised she didn't simply topple off of her paws.

"Hello, Cedarpaw," Thrushpaw greeted them warmly. Even his milky blind eye was brightened up to see them. "I hope you've been doing well."

"I'm alright," Cedarpaw assured him. "The real question is, how are you doing? Amaranthpaw seems to be crushing you."

"And we were really hoping to ask her about Nighthawk," Robinpaw added.

"Oh, no. Really, she hardly weighs a thing," Thrushpaw assured

him. "But I don't know if she's up to answering any questions right now. She's been working extra hard ever since Nighthawk got sick, and being around lots of cats just makes her even more tired."

"I'm fine, fine, I just..." Amaranthpaw insisted, but her response was quickly cut off by a large yawn.

"You need to sleep," Thrushpaw replied firmly.

Amaranthpaw didn't protest any further, and Cedarpaw could tell that they wouldn't be getting anything useful out of her tonight.

"There you are," Vixenflight purred, nodding at Thrushpaw and Amaranthpaw. "It's time to head home now."

***

When they finally returned to camp, Cedarpaw was finally hit by the inevitable wave of exhaustion. That didn't stop him from pricking up his ears as Swallowfall and Ravenmoon looked over their fresh-kill pile.

Maybe Skunktwist wasn't that far off about me.

"You're absolutely sure nothing's wrong?" Ravenmoon confirmed.

"Positive," Swallowfall assured her. "None of this prey feels, smells, or looks off in any way. Perfectly safe to eat."

"Good," Ravenmoon replied with a sigh. "In that case, I think we could all use a good night's sleep. Rest well, Swallowfall."

"And you, Ravenmoon," Swallowfall purred.

Cedarpaw quickly pushed into the apprentices' den and flopped into his nest. The others were all fast asleep, and if Swallowfall said their prey was alright, then maybe Robinpaw was right about Maplemoon being crazy. Or maybe whatever weird sickness Nighthawk had contracted was exclusive to SpiderClan.

At least if I don't have to worry about it, then that means I can get some sleep.

...Right?

Somehow, he couldn't quite shake the stab of anxiety that clung to his pelt like a thorn. What if it *wasn't* alright? What if Swallowfall had just been... wrong? A sickness wasn't like a fox or a bobcat. You couldn't just chase off a sickness.

If cats start getting sick, they might...

And I wouldn't be able to...

Despite his feeble attempt to fight it, exhaustion claimed him before he could properly unscramble his thoughts.

IV

I hear words in clips and phrases; I think sick like ginger ale.

Cedarpaw couldn't remember how he'd ended up in the water. All he knew was that if he stopped churning his paws, he'd sink.

Or was *it even water? The water in the rivers wasn't usually like this, all sticky and dark as if you'd liquified malice. The water in the rivers never felt like it was* trying *to drown you.*

His head spun, another crashing wave sending him beneath the surface. He struggled desperately, resisting the urge to yowl. At least until he could breathe again.

He managed to break the surface, gasping and thrashing his paws. He glanced desperately towards the riverbank, but all he could see in each direction was more and more water. Wasn't there land somewhere?

His eyes suddenly met with another pair. At least, he thought—hoped—it must be another cat's eyes. It could be a fox for all he cared, as long as something, anything*, would just get him out of the water.*

He paddled furiously towards the eyes. There must be land, or a stone to rest on. Anything would be better than this. Because Cedarpaw was not going to drown. Not here, not as long as he still had a scrap of fight left in him.

The eyes vanished before he was halfway towards them.

"Cedarpaw? *Cedarpaw*!"

The weight of a large, furry projectile crashing full-force into Cedarpaw knocked both his dream and the wind out of him. He let out a decidedly undignified sound that was some combination of a grunt and a squeak in response.

"Firepaw, don't crush him!" Palepaw cried, sounding genuinely distressed.

"I tried to tell you the oversized furball doesn't know his own strength," Robinpaw teased dryly.

Some semblance of feeling returning to him, Cedarpaw slowly opened his eyes. The avalanche of bright ginger fur to his left and right was obviously Firepaw. Robinpaw and Palepaw were watching him, both seeming relieved by his coming to.

"You know, I can handle being woken up," he grumbled, "but I think I draw the line at being suffocated in my nest."

"Sorry," Firepaw replied sheepishly, stepping lightly off him. "You were tossing and turning in your sleep. Palepaw thought you were having a nightmare."

Cedarpaw rolled his eyes, forcing himself to stand up and stretch. Whether it was because of his dream or Firepaw's unexpected tackling, every part of his body felt tired and stiff.

I didn't stay up that late, so why do I feel as if I swam the whole river ten times?

"You're not hurt, are you?" Firepaw added anxiously. "Really, I wasn't trying to be so heavy."

"I think I'll live," Cedarpaw assured him, giving his friend a warm tail-flick to try and signal there were no hard feelings. "Honestly, I *was* having a pretty bad dream."

"Do you want to talk about it?" Robinpaw asked, curling around him.

"Nah, it was nothing," Cedarpaw decided. "Dreams are just dreams. It spooked me a little, but it's not like it can hurt me."

Although maybe I will try to stay away from the river today, just in case...

A small, black head peered into the den, and Sablepaw quickly

padded towards them. Her tail flicked back and forth pleasantly, though she paused to give Cedarpaw a long look that suggested she didn't quite know what to make of him.

Now, granted, Cedarpaw didn't have any concrete evidence that Sablepaw was as bad as her brother. But the association alone was enough reason to avoid her regardless. He returned her stare with a small spark of defiance, a look familiar to Robinpaw, as she flicked her tail warningly at him.

"...You have pine needles in your fur," Sablepaw announced finally, cutting through the stony silence. She broke off staring at Cedarpaw, nodding politely at the other apprentices. "Ravenmoon is calling a meeting soon. She asked me to let you all know."

Just like that, Sablepaw padded out of the den. Cedarpaw waited for her tail to disappear before lapping at his coat. Whatever mixed feelings he had, she'd been right; his fur was a mess this morning.

"She's not that bad if you take some time to talk to her, you know," Firepaw remarked.

"You just get along with every cat you meet," Cedarpaw teased warmly. "Anyway, I doubt she'd want to talk to me. Not when Breezepaw and I are... the way we are."

"It's too early in the morning to be picking fights," Robinpaw cut in diplomatically. She shot Cedarpaw a meaningful look. "*Please*."

"It's just one meeting," Cedarpaw reminded her cheerfully. "I'll be as quiet as a mouse."

Robinpaw smiled softly, brushing his shoulder on her way outside. Palepaw followed at her heels. Firepaw purred, lapping his ear before joining them.

Just one meeting. I'm tired, but it's nothing I can't sit through.

Shaking out his pelt and giving himself one last lick, Cedarpaw bounded after his friends. Ravenmoon was already standing on the Highperch with Hollypaw of all cats at her side. The black tabby apprentice looked like she'd gotten to sleep about as well as he had,

which was to say not very well at all. Swallowfall nosed her shoulder sympathetically.

Most of the assembled cats were curious, eyes wide and whiskers twitching as they watched expectantly. Others were hunched more tentatively, a nervousness about their stiff shoulders and glassy eyes. He locked eyes with Breezepaw across the crowd, but he remembered his promise to Robinpaw, and just settled down between Grasshawk and Cardinalfire, as far away as he could get.

"Cats of RavineClan, I have called you here this morning with important news," Ravenmoon began. Her warm yellow eyes fixed on Hollypaw briefly. "Last night, Hollypaw received a vision."

"I did," Hollypaw confirmed, though she seemed uncertain. "I... I *think* it might have something to do with the sickness Maplemoon was talking about? But I'm not sure..."

"No cat expects you to know everything all at once," Swallowfall assured her kindly. "That's why we have meetings like this, to discuss what exactly our visions are trying to tell us. Do you mind sharing the message with us all?"

"I don't mind," Hollypaw agreed, cheering up considerably. She cleared her throat before continuing. "***What was once a safe haven will be uprooted by the raven. When the black feathers come, they will seep into lungs, and leave the Clans undone. Do not fear the abhor, for in the aftermath an encore of legacy shall echo forevermore***."

She stopped rather abruptly, blinking twice as if she hadn't been fully aware of what she was saying. But that must have been the full message as she appeared satisfied. Cedarpaw tipped his head, unable to stop himself from letting his curiosity wander. It all seemed a bit vague, if you asked him, though he supposed that's why they had cats like Swallowfall, who trained for moons to master the art of decryption.

"Should we start gathering tansy and ginger?" Vixenflight suggested. "Something seeping into a cat's lungs, that sounds like a cough. We could stop the worst of it if we treat it quickly."

"Hollypaw and I will stock up today," Swallowfall agreed. "If we can find any, blessed thistle might not be bad to have around either..."

"Do we really have to go rushing about to find herbs?" Dawnspots wondered aloud. "The last line of the message seemed to be saying everything would turn out alright, didn't it?"

Figuring no cat would be particularly interested in his input anyway, Cedarpaw decided to leave Ravenmoon and her warriors to argue while he got something to fill his belly. The fresh-kill pile still had a few leftovers from last night. Not feeling very choosy, he selected a scrawny goldfinch and settled down near Palepaw, Firepaw, and Breezepaw, who had formed a small group to talk.

"I wonder what Hollypaw's vision means," Palepaw remarked. Her eyes were lit up like stars. "A real prophecy! That's so exciting!"

"Sure, if you *like* ominous warnings about impending doom," Firepaw teased. Cedarpaw twitched his ears, amused.

"Besides, I'm sure the prophecy won't involve either of you," Breezepaw added loftily. "Sablepaw or I make much more sense to be chosen as an encore of legacy."

"Oh, I guess you're right!" Palepaw agreed, though she didn't seem to lose her enthusiasm for an instant. "That would be pretty cool. Imagine being a prophecy cat..."

An all-too-familiar burning sensation began to spread through Cedarpaw's body. He *knew* he was probably just extra grumpy because of his poor night's sleep. He *knew* he had promised Robinpaw not to start any arguments.

I don't care what *she says, that arrogant mange-pelt* deserves *to be clawed down to size!*

He stood up, dropping a small shower of feathers he'd forgotten to lick from his muzzle. All three apprentices looked startled by his approach, and the fact that they apparently hadn't even realised he was there sent a thrill of satisfaction through him.

"Trying to bribe yourself a couple of friends, *prophecy cat?*" he

growled, eyes locked firmly on Breezepaw. He could feel the concerned stares of Firepaw and Palepaw on him, but he shook them off.

"I don't have to bribe any cat to be friends with them," Breezepaw replied coolly. "Unlike you, I don't try to bite their heads off. And you can't deny that my theory makes sense, logically speaking."

"You're right," Cedarpaw admitted, much to Breezepaw's surprise. Slowly, he lashed his tail, a dangerous softness creeping into his tone as they began to circle each other. "You're the kit of a leader. You're probably next in line if something happens to Shadowblink, so every cat is *obligated* to put up with you."

They stopped moving, eyes still locked. The blue-grey apprentice looked one wispy breeze away from snapping like a twig. Cedarpaw couldn't resist the self-satisfied smirk that crept onto his face, and he unsheathed his claws as he took a step forward.

"Must be nice," Cedarpaw snarled. "Of course, I never was one for following stupid rules. So if you ever need some cat to give you a reality check, you know where to find me."

He was prepared for Breezepaw to snap something back, or at least to storm off and lick his wounds until he could come up with a suitable retort. So he was caught completely off guard by the blue-grey tom suddenly releasing a guttural growl and knocking him off his paws.

"You hypocritical, fox-hearted, *nuisance*!" Breezepaw spat, though Cedarpaw could only partially register what he was saying while avoiding getting his ears cuffed. "*I'm* the one who needs a reality check? At least my parents *have* status!"

Fueled by the sudden wave of adrenaline, Cedarpaw whapped a paw across Breezepaw's face, battering him across the nose with sheathed claws. He might've been angry, but Breezepaw hadn't actually clawed him, so he would at least fight fair. The two toms glared at each other as they shook out their dust-covered coats.

"At least *my* father never had to act as a toy for twolegs," Cedarpaw

hissed between small, panty breaths.

Breezepaw froze, something that could only be described as genuine hurt flashing across his face. Palepaw's light blue eyes were round and full of concern, while Firepaw hurriedly removed himself from the situation entirely.

"Breezepaw, I..."

Those dark amber eyes narrowed so fiercely that Cedarpaw cut himself off. What could he have said, anyway? Some half-baked apology that wouldn't even begin to mend the damage he just caused?

I didn't mean it.

He dropped his gaze, the sound of paw steps filling his ears. Breezepaw wouldn't have wasted any time in leaving, but some cat apparently thought to sit next to him. He didn't need to look up to recognise his sister's warmth and scent. Not that he could feel much of anything besides the numbness that was beginning to creep over him.

"Cedarpaw, come with me," a much gruffer, but still familiar voice ordered. He raised his head, dejectedly meeting Brackenstep's gaze. "I think it might be good for you to get out of camp for a little while. Orchidwind, Shadowblink, and I are about to leave for a patrol."

Right, because you don't want me going off on any of the other apprentices like that, Cedarpaw guessed miserably.

He didn't say that out loud, though. In fact, as he rose to his paws and followed his father out of camp, he didn't say anything at all.

V

Oh how don't you drown in a rainstorm?

Cedarpaw bolted forward, hooking his claws into a squirrel's shaggy coat. They tumbled over each other down the slope until they stopped, landing with Cedarpaw firmly rooted atop his quarry. Orchidwind, Brackenstep, and Shadowblink caught up to him fairly quickly.

"Nice catch, Cedarpaw!" Brackenstep purred.

"Yeah, we don't get too many squirrels around here either," Orchidwind agreed.

Cedarpaw was so busy taking in the squirrel's reddish fur, not unlike his own pelt, that he couldn't respond. He dug his claws in deeper. The bright, crimson blood warmed his paws even in spite of the stickiness.

"Now don't shred it!" Orchidwind chided, gently nosing him away. She made short work of lightly burying his catch.

"If we're quite done here, we still have a patrol to finish," Shadowblink reminded them.

"Oh, keep your fur on," Brackenstep teased lightly. "We've got plenty of time. And besides, when has ThicketClan ever wanted to bother us?"

Shadowblink shrugged amiably in reply, seemingly more at ease. Cedarpaw followed as they headed back up the slope to pad along the ThicketClan border. He hadn't cleaned his paws, though in the back of his mind he knew he would probably regret that later. Focusing on Shadowblink instead was a welcome distraction.

Useless cat. What's the point of having authority if you aren't going to

use *it?*

He quickly shook the thought off, guilt pricking at his insides. Breezepaw didn't need *more* reasons to be angry with him right now. Besides, Shadowblink hadn't actually done anything to warrant any ill will. The RavineClan heir was most likely trying to avoid creating unnecessary tension between the group of patrolling cats.

"RavineClan, state your business," a sharp voice called out.

Cedarpaw cursed himself briefly for losing himself in *another* daydream, then padded closer to his father's side. Featherpaw was standing between a blue-grey tabby tom and a cream and white molly on the ThicketClan edge of their shared border. He avoided meeting Featherpaw's gaze, uncomfortable with the friendliness he knew he'd find in it.

For reasons he couldn't explain, ThicketClanners as a collective were just... like that. Thicketmoon might've been the least emotive of the Clan leaders, eyes almost permanently glazed with disinterest, but the cats under his command certainly hadn't gotten the memo. They tended to be the most relaxed at gatherings, the first to initiate conversations across the border, and if any druids were running low on herbs, it would be Chasewhisker who pointed out that there was plenty to go around in his den.

"Streamstone, Meadowtear," Shadowblink greeted them both politely, dipping his head. "Good to see you. We are simply performing a border patrol. Is the prey running well in ThicketClan?"

"Very well, thank you," Meadowtear replied, any previous caginess quickly vanishing for now. "Featherpaw here is even keeping the martens on their toes! If you ask me, she's due for an assessment soon."

"I'm really fast," Featherpaw added proudly. "Streamstone says Slatepaw and I get that from our mom."

"That's because Nettlespring happens to be the most fantastic cat in

the Clan," Streamstone purred, butting her shoulder playfully. He twitched his whiskers curiously. "How about you? Have you noticed anything strange in your part of the forest?"

"No, not a thing," Orchidwind admitted with a light shrug. "Perhaps Maplemoon was getting worked up over a one-time incident."

We aren't going to tell them about Hollypaw's vision?

Cedarpaw finally glanced up to study the patrol. Streamstone was big, and unlike Firepaw, he couldn't really tell how much of that size was muscle and how much of it was just fur. Meadowtear had a similar build to Callamouse; delicate and fluffy, with rounded features and a bushy tail. The thing all three cats had in common was their flattened, well-groomed fur and brightened eyes.

"Oh, I've never thought about hunting like that," Meadowtear was meowing thoughtfully. Her eyes flitting over Cedarpaw made him uncomfortable. "And what about Cedarpaw? He must be coming into his own through training by now."

Cedarpaw subtly dug his claws into the dirt as the RiftClan patrol shared uncertain glances. They didn't have to treat him like a wounded fox just because he'd woken up on the wrong side of his nest *one* time. Breezepaw had been *asking* for a fight, and anyway, he'd kept his claws sheathed.

"Cedarpaw is loyal, and a quick thinker," Brackenstep reported. "RavineClan is lucky to have a cat with plenty of spunk to defend it."

Relieved, Cedarpaw pressed against his father's side. For some reason, the group of cats staring at him wasn't making him agitated, as it usually did. He couldn't quite name the pit tightening his stomach and filling him with the urge to run away and curl up in his nest back at camp.

"We should be getting on our way," Shadowblink decided briskly, flicking his tail. "It was nice to chat. Please extend our regards to Thicketmoon."

"Likewise," Streamstone purred lazily. "It's getting a bit dark anyhow, and I could do with a good nap."

"Take care crossing back to your camp!" Meadowtear added, her tail swishing in a friendly manner.

Cedarpaw stuck close to Brackenstep's side as his patrol began to hike back up towards the heart RavineClan's hunting grounds. He glanced just slightly over his shoulder, and catching Featherpaw's gaze, extended what he hoped was a polite wave of his tail.

***

With the sunlight beginning to fade, climbing back up the slope they had practically slid down earlier was an interesting challenge. RavineClan cats were lucky, he reflected now, to have thicker and longer claws for scaling the scrublands. Though they weren't quite as lucky when it came to the amount of dirt that clumped up beneath said claws. Between that, and the squirrel blood still caked around his paws, Cedarpaw was *really* regretting failing to groom himself earlier.

Dawnspots greeted the patrol with a half-drowsy nod, stepping aside to allow them through the camp entrance. At this time of day, most of the warriors and apprentices would be lazing about the camp, sharing tongues or getting ready to curl up for the night.

"Drop that squirrel off at the fresh-kill pile and get some rest," Brackenstep ordered, gently breaking the small bubble of silence that Cedarpaw couldn't seem to shake.

Unable to respond with anything more than a nod due to the scrap of fluff clamped in his jaws, he padded off to do just that. It seemed like the Clan's hunting today had been good. Not that Cedarpaw was feeling particularly hungry tonight, even if the smell of the squirrel he was carrying should have been tempting.

My paws feel like I dragged them through a creek of mouse bile.

He tossed the squirrel into the fresh-kill pile with a sharp twist of his head. Satisfied, he sat down and began drawing his tongue over

his forepaws. Over, and over, and over he lapped, shaking grass blades free here and smoothing his pricked-up fur down there.

Once he felt his paws were taken care of, he slumped back on his haunches, realising just how exhausting the day had been. He considered just dragging himself into the apprentice's den, and winced as he remembered that would mean having to confront Breezepaw again. Not even divine intervention on the part of Mother Moon herself could make *that* go well.

"Cedarpaw, how are you feeling?" Firepaw's voice was soft and gentle as he settled down just across from him. Robinpaw did the same, her eyes full of something Cedarpaw was too tired to decipher.

"Fine," Cedarpaw responded, almost automatically. He didn't look up to meet their eyes. "Just worn out. I'm probably going to head inside the den soon."

"Orchidwind seems pretty eager to brag about the squirrel you caught," Robinpaw remarked hopefully. "The way she's going on, it's almost as bad as Vixenflight."

Cedarpaw shrugged, mostly numb to the praise and disinterested in chatting. But no amount of exhaustion gave him the heart to tell his best friend, not to mention his sister, to leave him alone no matter how desperately he wished he could.

"...Right, you'll probably want to get some sleep," Robinpaw sighed. The disappointment in her mew made him feel even worse. "Come on, Firepaw. He'll... be back to himself in the morning."

Cedarpaw knew she didn't really believe that, but all he could really feel was relief at being left to his own devices. Maybe he would find somewhere on the edge of camp to sleep, and just keep out of every cat's way altogether. That might make the churning in his stomach stop.

"I think you should have some of this." Hollypaw, who had appeared to disrupt his peace from AzureClan-knows-where, nudged a bundle of scraggly-looking leaves towards him. "It's

dandelion, and before you argue, I can tell something's got you worked up."

Cedarpaw didn't have the energy to try and protest. The dandelion leaves were rough and bitter, but it wasn't difficult to lap up the pawful before swallowing them down. It surprised him to feel his insides start to settle down.

"...Thanks, I think that feels better," Cedarpaw mumbled simply. Hollypaw flopped down right next to him, which was much closer than he'd expected—and maybe wanted—any cat to get.

"Well, it helps when you decide not to be stubborn," Hollypaw teased lightly. "Anyway. The stars are bright tonight, don't you think?"

Cedarpaw tilted his head towards the sky, taking in the milky frost of starshine slowly creeping across the horizon. He couldn't tell if it was the beauty, or the dandelion kicking in, but he finally felt at ease.

"You think AzureClan wants to tell us something?" he asked, not very seriously.

"Who knows," Hollypaw replied dreamily, flicking her ears. "Though speaking of... visions, I have something to ask you."

"Does Swallowfall want me sorting more herbs?" Cedarpaw's pelt spiked at the thought. "Because I'm not interested. Not tonight anyway."

"No, nothing like that," Hollypaw purred. In this light, her amber eyes resembled pools of honey. "I was just thinking, that's all. If you really want to level the playing field against Breezepaw, well, druids have visions all the time."

Cedarpaw shifted slightly, torn between confusion and surprise. "You want to lie to our Clanmates about... me being in one of your dreams?"

"It just came to me while I was thinking about how you'd probably need cheering up," Hollypaw replied innocently. "You don't have to

agree. Druids usually shouldn't get involved in arguments like that."

Cedarpaw mulled the idea over in his mind for all of a heartbeat. He knew, more than anything else, exactly what he wanted to be doing right now. There was nothing to be gained from worrying. This spat with Breezepaw wasn't a problem that could be solved overnight anyway.

"You think you could give me the night to sleep on it?"

VI

Now I'm nervous and I shouldn't be.

Brackenstep twisted his paw, deftly flicking another silvery trout out of the water. Cedarpaw twitched his whiskers as the resulting splash brushed against his muzzle. His father had suggested that he might like to train alone today, and Cedarpaw hadn't felt like arguing about it.

So, fishing it was. With all the awkward silence, pelt-pricking tedium, and deep, dark water that activity entailed. Decidedly not one of Cedarpaw's favourite ways to pass the time.

"Just like that, you see?" Brackenstep purred, gesturing towards his catch. "Remember not to let the fish spot your shadow. Then it's all about having quick paws!"

Cedarpaw nodded as if he'd been paying attention, even though he really hadn't. "Yeah, I've got it, dad."

"Give it a try, then," Brackenstep suggested. "You're getting better. I'm sure you'll catch something."

Resigned, Cedarpaw carefully positioned himself beside the river in such a way that he wouldn't cast his shadow over it. He thought he caught the sound of rustling over the border, but he forced himself to focus on the fish flitting back and forth beneath the current. One that had been moving more slowly than the others came to a brief rest in some shade.

Caught you!

Biting down his reluctance, Cedarpaw thrust his forepaw into the chilling water. He felt his claws hook through slippery scales. The thrill of the hunt had enthralled him now, and he tugged with all

the fervour of a predator intent on the kill.

"Well done!" Brackenstep observed, tail raised high with pride.

"Thank you," Cedarpaw replied simply.

Though he couldn't suppress the warm feeling spreading through his chest as he carefully set his fish alongside his father's. It was almost enough to make him forget about how wet his front legs were. *Almost.*

"We'd best be getting back to camp," Brackenstep decided. "This is a fine haul, but fish won't stay fresh out here in the sunlight."

"Right," Cedarpaw agreed.

While the whole fishing businesses made them more trouble than they were worth, Cedarpaw had to admit the odd, scaled creatures didn't taste too bad. So he allowed himself to draw in some of the tempting prey-scent as he lifted his catch into his jaws. Brackenstep playfully brushed his shoulder before leading the way back towards RavineClan camp.

They hardly made it away from the bank of the river, however, when the sound of paw steps sent them both on high alert. Across the water, on the edge of the SpiderClan border, was Amaranthpaw. The petite calico's pelt was fluffed up in odd places, as if she'd slept at a funny angle.

"Cedarpaw, hello," she greeted him kindly, albeit in the sort of tone that suggested she was tired. "It was... you who came and said hello to me at the last Moonshine Conclave... right?"

Cedarpaw dropped his fish with a squishy *thump*. "Yeah, that was me. You had to get back to your Clan before we could talk much, though."

I'm surprised you remember speaking to me at all, considering you could hardly keep yourself on your paws!

"Oh, I'm sorry," Amaranthpaw replied sheepishly. "I've just had my paws really full lately. It's even worse since Frondshade has gotten

sick..."

"Your mentor is sick?" Brackenstep repeated. "No wonder you look like you haven't slept in a moon... Don't you have any cat helping you keep up?"

"Most of them don't have any experience with healing herbs, or they're already getting sick themselves," Amaranthpaw admitted. "I'm doing my best, really I am! But I wish AzureClan would tell me what to do..."

"You know what kinds of herbs there are and how to use them, don't you?" Cedarpaw pointed out. *What does AzureClan have to do with it?*

"Have you figured out what herbs to use to cure whatever this illness is?" Brackenstep added more gently.

"Poppy seeds seem to keep them calmed down." Amaranthpaw fixed her gaze between her forepaws. "I'm sorry. I don't know what else to do for them at the moment."

"What kind of symptoms make it so you'd *need* to... calm them down?" Cedarpaw blurted.

"Nothing, I mean, they aren't dangerous or anything," Amaranthpaw assured him quickly. "It's just... there's something not right with the cats who catch this illness. I hate the idea of just letting them stay uneasy."

"Cedarpaw! Come on, we're needed back at camp!"

Brackenstep's abruptness left no room for argument. Still gaping due to having parted his jaws halfway towards forming a response, Cedarpaw awkwardly dipped his head to Amaranthpaw. Though the gesture was clumsy, it allowed him to both bade her farewell and snatch his prey back up at the same time.

"May the Stars guide you," Amaranthpaw called after him.

Cedarpaw couldn't help but notice that while her voice was warm, there was something strangely flat about that remark.

***

"Go add your fish to the fresh-kill pile," Brackenstep ordered, flicking his tail simply. "I need to speak with Ravenmoon."

Cedarpaw nodded, though his head was spinning with curiosity. He practically raced across the camp, desperate to free up his tongue. There were too many questions dancing on the tip for him to contain them. In fact, he was so caught up in those questions, that he didn't even notice himself barrel into a dark-furred Clanmate.

"Great Stars, where's the battle?" Littlefoot teased, whiskers twitching with amusement.

"Sorry!" Cedarpaw squeaked, although the response was muffled. He quickly dropped the scaly culprits at the fresh-kill pile's edge. "I was distracted. Something weird is going on, and I want to ask Brackenstep more about it!"

"Must be important to have you this worked up," Littlefoot observed. "Haven't you been hunting all morning? Why not slow down a minute and have something to eat first?"

Cedarpaw considered her words. Now that his head was cleared, he had to admit that getting something to eat wouldn't be an awful idea. Then again, he couldn't risk Brackenstep getting away before letting him know what Ravenmoon had to say. Torn by the indecision, he pawed absentmindedly at the ground. He almost immediately recoiled as his paw pads were met with something slimy, cold, and wet.

...Has some cat been for a swim?

He glanced down, expecting to see watery tracks or a trail of mud. But the only thing at his paws was a blackbird some cat had dropped off. Confused, he touched his nose to the thing, only to jolt back with shock.

The blackbird felt *cold*. Not the normal fading of heat as the freshness began to wear thin through its slow transition to rot-food. Cold like the river in leaf-bare was cold. Cold like the swirling,

black mass of drowning water from his dream had been. Cold like *death.*

The feathers... they're... dripping?

He shook his head, blinking to readjust his eyes. He must have been seeing things. Letting his hunger make him think stupid things. Bird feathers weren't like water, they didn't drip, and they certainly weren't chilling to touch.

Stop being such a kit. Just pick a piece of prey and eat it, then you'll have your head straight again.

Turning back to the fresh-kill pile, he realised that it wasn't just this bird. Every bird was a deep, ebony black that slowly dripped like liquid poppy seeds. Once again, for a brief moment, he was drawn back to the memory of his nightmare.

Once again, for a brief moment, Cedarpaw found himself flailing helplessly in the water.

"Cedarpaw?"

Stumbling on his paws, Cedarpaw turned to face whichever cat had spoken. Littlefoot was still there, and staring at him, eyes round with concern.

"Y-Yes? What is it?" Cedarpaw dug his claws into the earth. Just earth. He wasn't drowning.

"Are you feeling alright?" Littlefoot pressed gently. "You looked as if... you were somewhere else for a moment. I can fetch Swallowfall."

"No," Cedarpaw snapped sharply, quickly regretting it. "Thank you, but I'm fine. Really."

"At least take something to eat," Littlefoot insisted.

"Later, maybe," Cedarpaw mumbled evasively. "I'm not hungry right now. There's something too important to do first."

He spun around before the sleek black molly could question him further. The hallucination had quashed his appetite, and he didn't know how to explain himself. He wasn't sure he wanted to.

There's only one place I can think of where I might be able to snap myself out of this.

As if drawn by some inexplicable force, his paws led him back towards the camp entrance. What was it Hollypaw had given him before? Something green and bitter. But it had relaxed him enough to allow him to fall asleep. Swallowfall would know what it was, she would probably have more of it somewhere.

...Only I don't want to talk to her. She asks too many questions.

Cedarpaw's head was aching enough already. He could just about vaguely remember what the herb had smelled like. That would probably be enough for him to find some on his own, without the need to bother any cat.

"Let all cats old enough to scale the ravine gather beneath the Highperch to hear my words!" Ravenmoon's yowl broke out suddenly across the clearing.

Sighing huffily, Cedarpaw spun around and began to pad towards the Highperch. Today had started off so well. Now he was all kinds of out of sorts with no idea how to clear his mind.

If AzureClan really does predict fate, they had better have a really *good explanation for this.*

VII

Find nothing but faith in nothing.

The nervous energy in the assembled RavineClan cats was palpable. Muscles were tensed, ears pricked forward in order to hear the latest news, and even a few tails swung in restless rhythm. Brackenstep stood in between Ravenmoon and Toadbrine, with Swallowfall and Hollypaw off to the side.

"Cats of RavineClan, Brackenstep has uncovered some troubling information," Ravenmoon announced calmly. She then nodded, allowing Brackenstep to continue for her.

"While hunting, Cedarpaw and I crossed paths with Amaranthpaw of SpiderClan," the tawny tabby explained. Cedarpaw had never seen his father conduct himself with such authority before. "She mentioned something interesting. At present, SpiderClan is very weak, with sickness spreading rapidly and no clear cure available."

Hushed speculation rippled through the assembled cats. Cedarpaw's own pelt prickled with interest, and if not for the fear of ruffling some cat's fur, he might have pushed his way into joining the other apprentices near the front of the crowd.

"Would the sickness be contagious, then?" Troutdrift asked. His eyes flicked towards the nursery, immediately giving away the object of his concern.

"We don't know," Brackenstep admitted.

"What exactly are you telling us this for?" Dawnspots tipped her head, disinterest marked across her features.

"This does sound like a SpiderClan problem to me," Briarcliff

agreed. "None of our cats are falling ill."

"Be that as it may," Ravenmoon cut back in, "I intend to assemble a patrol to investigate. Remaining in the dark is ignorance. Ignorance is the mark of a sloppy warrior."

"Hollypaw and I will go," Swallowfall added, and her tone made it clear that this was a simple fact, not an offer.

"Yes," Ravenmoon agreed. "Toadbrine and Breezepaw will accompany me as well."

Cedarpaw could see Breezepaw fluff his fur up, either with pride or excitement, but probably both. Though for once, he didn't particularly care. He had something much more important on his mind. And perhaps, he reflected, Amaranthpaw would be the cat with the answers he was looking for.

"I'll come along, too," Cedarpaw announced to no cat in particular. Or rather, to every cat in the crowd.

"This isn't a mission for an apprentice," Briarcliff snorted.

"True, and a patrol of five cats is large enough," Toadbrine observed thoughtfully. "Any more than that, and Maplemoon might assume we're attempting a raid."

"But I helped Brackenstep find this out in the first place!" Cedarpaw protested, claws spiking the dirt. "Plus, Amaranthpaw likes me! She talked to me so easily before. I could get her to tell us what's going on."

"That's not your decision to make." Ravenmoon's tone wasn't menacing, but the finality in her words made Cedarpaw's heart sink. "This meeting is dismissed. Rest up for tomorrow. We leave for SpiderClan's camp at first light."

Frustration churned in Cedarpaw's belly as most of the Clan dispersed. Not only was he nowhere close to satisfying the frantic buzzing in his head, but he'd also just managed to make a fool of himself in front of the whole Clan. *Again*. His sour mood wasn't helped by Breezepaw sauntering over to him.

"Nice speech, fox-pelt," Breezepaw snickered. "I'm sure you would have made Amaranthpaw feel as if she was talking to a Clanmate."

"Do you want another bruised shoulder, then?" Cedarpaw growled.

Breezepaw snarled, but Cedarpaw spun around and stalked away. To where, he didn't know. He just needed to get out of camp. Preferably somewhere quiet, where he could sort out his scattered thoughts.

"Hunting?" Fennelpool asked politely.

Cedarpaw gazed blankly into her soft amber eyes. Fennelpool didn't normally accept the station of camp guard. Still, though, she was better than most cats he could have blundered past. And despite his lack of an answer, she gave him a knowing look as she flicked her tail between his ears.

"Sometimes the air in camp can feel suffocating," she remarked. Lowering her voice to a whisper, she added, "Don't stay out too late. Maybe think about bringing back a mouse or two."

Cedarpaw nodded gratefully. He scrabbled easily up and over the brushlands leading away from RidgeClan proper. The flexing of his claws as they tore away little bits of leaf litter grounded him. It made him feel more aware of himself.

"Cedarpaw, wait up!" Hollypaw, appearing from nowhere as seemed to be her habit, bounded up to his side.

"Out gathering herbs?" Cedarpaw guessed, unsure whether or not he really wanted to be dragged into a conversation.

"Swallowfall wants as many poppy seeds as I can get my paws on," Hollypaw agreed lightly. "What about you? What are you doing out here?"

"...Dahliaskip's kits were hungry," Cedarpaw lied simply. "So hunting, I guess."

"Right." Hollypaw's whiskers twitched, and he guessed she didn't believe him. "Good luck, then. I'm sure the prey will be running

somewhere."

The black tabby padded softly away, her strides carrying her with purpose. Cedarpaw stared after her uncertainly. He'd been acting like a cloud-brained kit since returning to camp with Brackenstep.

What in the name of Stars am *I doing out here? I thought I had some direction I wanted to go, but...*

He shook out his pelt decisively. Enough was enough. What had he been in such an uproar about? The fact that he couldn't tag along on Ravenmoon's mission of diplomacy? Well, he had a solution to *that* problem now, and here he was letting her just walk away.

I really need to get my head together. No more going this long without some fresh-kill.

New resolve giving him a second wind, he quickly picked up his pace in order to catch up with Hollypaw. She was carefully picking long, black seeds from the middle of a dark red flower, but she acknowledged his arrival with a small nod.

"I'd like to talk to you," he explained. "May I? I'll help you carry any herbs you pick up as we go."

"About time," Hollypaw teased, taking him off guard by butting against his shoulder. "Something has clearly been bugging you lately. Come with me and tell me about it."

***

Before he knew it, Cedarpaw found himself matching Hollypaw's paw steps, trailing the outskirts of the Unbound Thicket as they plucked seeds from sweet-smelling poppies. Cedarpaw thought the scent from such flowers was enough to make a cat's head spin. The druid apprentice seemed much less bothered.

"So you see, I just *have* to know what's going on in SpiderClan," Cedarpaw concluded, punctuating his ramble with a sharp sneeze.

"You're a kind cat, when you aren't acting like a grumpy old badger," Hollypaw observed. "I'll admit, I'm worried about

Amaranthpaw. But what can we do about it? Ravenmoon has already made up her mind."

"That's where I was hoping you could step in," Cedarpaw admitted sheepishly. "You said you'd be willing to... put in a good word for me, remember? I think now might be a good time."

"Oh, I see." Hollypaw looked thoughtful. "Yes, I think you might be right."

"So you'll do it?" Cedarpaw's heart lifted.

"Of course," Hollypaw purred. "Visiting SpiderClan will be much more fun with a cat my own age."

"Thank you," Cedarpaw breathed. His chest felt clear for the first time since returning to camp.

"It was no problem," Hollypaw assured him. "Druids are here to help. Speaking of, you should finish your hunt and get back to camp. You look about to drop off your paws."

Though her assessment was correct, Cedarpaw hesitated. "You're sure you don't need help carrying these back?"

"I'll manage," Hollypaw promised. "And I'll be sure to get some rest once I'm done. I have a feeling AzureClan will want to share dreams with me tonight."

Cedarpaw released a deep purr from his throat in response.

***

Trailing back into camp with a mouse in tow, Cedarpaw was welcomed with a wink from Fennelpool. His friend's mentor allowed him to slip through the entrance without any fuss, and he traded his catch for a tasty-looking carp. While not usually big on fish, carp tended to be palatable enough, and some cat may as well eat it since river prey wouldn't keep through moonrise.

I feel like I could eat a fox!

Cedarpaw didn't bother to find a more secluded place to eat. He simply wolfed down the scaly delight there on the spot. Everything seemed to settle down with a full belly, like applying poultice to soothe a stinging wound. He licked his whiskers, pondering what to do next.

Nothing much I can *do, until Hollypaw makes her move,* he decided. *May as well get some sleep.*

Of course, that would mean potentially bumping into Breezepaw in the apprentice's den. But he would have to face that risk eventually, so it would probably be better to just get it over with.

Pushing his way inside, he found that both Breezepaw and Sablepaw were absent. Robinpaw, Firepaw, and Palepaw all turned to greet him, a tentative hope flickering in their smiles. He was almost tempted to thank AzureClan for his stroke of luck.

"Hey, Cedarpaw," Firepaw broke the ice warmly.

"How are you feeling?" Robinpaw pressed, touching her nose lightly to his ear. "Your breath smells like prey..."

"I just ate something, don't worry," Cedarpaw purred. "I know I've been... prickly. I'm really tired, that's all."

"Then get some sleep," Robinpaw ordered, and Cedarpaw nodded.

"Sleep well, Cedarpaw," Palepaw murmured, sounding halfway there herself.

Cedarpaw was pulled from his slumber by an irritating cacophony of birdsong. The incessant chattering filled his ears until he had to press them against his skull, staggering to his paws.

"Stop it!" he yowled, but his voice was drowned out by the screeching of the ravens.

Desperate to escape the noise, Cedarpaw darted from the den. To his confusion, the familiar, sturdy walls of RiftClan camp had vanished. He was on an unfamiliar prey track, surrounded on all sides by trees. Trees that, from the sounds of it, all contained an entire Clan of birds each.

"Quiet!" he hissed desperately. "I can't hear myself think!"

His protests fell on deaf ears. The ravens only became louder, a full crescendo of screeches crashing around Cedarpaw until he finally broke down, adding his own feeble voice to the cacophony.

Couldn't some cat hear him through the chaos?

"There, there, kit. It's alright now. You're safe."

Quiet. The smell of... something he couldn't place, but he knew was kept within Swallowfall's den. For a moment, Cedarpaw remained limp, hardly daring to breathe. Was it over?

"Come on, lazy paws," a saccharine voice encouraged. "You aren't dead yet."

Slowly, Cedarpaw complied with the request. Opening one eye, he caught the amused yellow gaze of a fluffy white molly. He'd never seen this cat before, but she didn't seem like an enemy.

"...Who are you?" Cedarpaw forced the fur on his back to lie flat again. "Where is this place?"

"So full of questions," the white molly noted. "My name is Cloudwing. Shadowblink knows me."

"Okay," Cedarpaw agreed, "and about where we are?"

"When you focus too intently on a single piece of prey, you will find yourself missing others," Cloudwing chided playfully. "Besides, I think you know exactly where you are."

Cedarpaw rolled his eyes, mulling over her words. How was he meant to know where this was? He'd been...

Hang on, what was I doing just now? I... I think I spoke to Robinpaw in the apprentices' den...

Cold dread shot straight through his heart. The white molly had her head tipped expectantly, clearly waiting for his answer. He held her gaze warily.

"Are you... dead?" The question felt sour on his tongue.

"Are you?" Cloudwing countered, her voice a teasing purr.

"I hope not." The fur around Cedarpaw's neck fluffed up self-consciously.

I can't be dead. I just went to sleep! My Clanmates still need me... don't they?

"Of course they do," Cloudwing soothed, running her fluffy tail along his spine. "Your time is a long way off, little one. Don't fret."

"Then why am I here?" Cedarpaw demanded. "AzureClan doesn't just invade random dreams for leisure, as far as I'm aware. What do you want?"

"My, your tongue is as prickly as a thorn bush," Cloudwing observed. "I suppose you're right, though. I was hoping you'd pass a message along for me."

"Who might that message be for?" Cedarpaw flicked an ear uncertainly.

"Amaranthpaw," Cloudwing replied simply. "You plan to speak with her soon, don't you?"

Well, that was certainly true enough. "Assuming all goes to plan, yes. What's the message?"

"Remind her that she's not alone," Cloudwing requested softly. "I'm afraid her spirit is... shaken. Please let her know that we're still here for her."

"If I do get the chance to speak with her, I'll let her know," Cedarpaw promised. "Couldn't you speak with her directly, though? Or to Frondshade?"

"Frondshade is too weak," Cloudwing admitted sadly. "He needs to rest. I've tried to speak with Amaranthpaw myself... but I can't seem to reach her."

Cedarpaw blinked, allowing his head to bob to one side. "Why not? She's a druid. Don't you speak to druids all the time?"

"That's enough pondering for one night." Cloudwing gently ran her tail along his muzzle, a playful gleam in her eyes. "Get back to sleep. You're going to have a very big day tomorrow, no?"

Cedarpaw wanted to protest, but anything he intended to say was cut off by a yawn. Against his wishes, exhaustion caught up to him, leaving him to sway on his paws before familiar darkness enveloped him.